

NEWS FROM ED MARKEY

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

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MARKEY QUESTIONS NRC ABOUT JAPAN NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

U.S. Reactors Use Design Similar to Japanese Reactor Where Fatal Accident Occurred

Washington, DC: Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA), a senior member of the Homeland Security Committee and the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the panel which oversees nuclear power regulation, today released a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) regarding the August 9 accident at the Mihama nuclear power plant in Mihama, Japan that killed 4 people.

"There may be lessons we can learn from the tragedy in Japan," said Rep. Markey. "U.S. reactors use similar designs, and accidents resembling the one at the Japanese reactor already have occurred in the U.S. We need to make sure they don't happen again here."

According to press reports, four nuclear reactor workers were killed on August 9, 2004 when super-heated steam escaped from a ruptured pipe in a building housing turbines for a reactor at the Mihama nuclear power plant. The pipe section that ruptured reportedly had not been inspected in 28 years, and the thickness of the pipe was subsequently found to have been well below the safety standard.

A similar incident occurred in the U.S. in 1986, when a non-radioactive leak in the turbine building at the Surry nuclear power plant in Virginia scalded 8 workers, 4 of whom died as a result of their injuries. Other workers were also severely injured in the accident. A March 18, 1988 Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation into this matter requested by Rep. Markey concluded that the events raised "questions about the long-term safety of pipe systems in nuclear power plants."

After the Surry accident, the NRC required owners to improve their "erosion/corrosion" programs that measured the wall thicknesses of high energy (based on temperature and pressure) piping. Rep. Markey's letter requests information regarding the status of these programs, including information related to the frequency and scope of the required inspections, how NRC ensures that nuclear reactor operators are conducting them appropriately, and whether the NRC has ever taken enforcement action against reactor licensees who fail to comply with the requirements.

For a copy of the letter, or other information regarding Rep. Markey's work related to the safety of the nuclear industry, please see <http://www.house.gov/markey/nucreactorsec.htm>